DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 432 619 TM 030 012

AUTHOR Sunderman, Gail L.; Nardini, Gloria
TITLE Institutional Constraints on Implementing School Reform: Lessons from Chicago.
INSTITUTION Johns Hopkins Univ., Baltimore, MD. Center for Social Organization of Schools.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE 1999-04-00
NOTE 35p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Montreal, Quebec, Canada, April 19-23, 1999).
CONTRACT RJ96006301
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative (142) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Educational Change; Elementary Secondary Education; *Institutional Characteristics; *Partnerships in Education; *Professional Development; Program Implementation; *Urban Schools
IDENTIFIERS *Chicago Public Schools IL; Constraints; Reform Efforts

ABSTRACT

The role of external partners in school reform in Chicago (Illinois) was studied. The first section of this paper outlines the analytical perspective that guides the study, expressing the view that unless the institutional structure of the system as a whole and teacher autonomy are figured into the design of the program, institutionalizing long-term change is unlikely. The second section presents a brief summary of school reform in Chicago under the 1995 Chicago School Reform Amendatory Act. This section also describes the specific intervention program provided by one partner followed in the study, the LEARN program. LEARN (pseudonym) focused on teachers' instructional practices through a professional development program. The third section describes the research design and data collection strategies, and the fourth section contains findings. The LEARN program was evaluated through interviews with 10 teachers and administrators and classroom observations. Study of the LEARN program provided many insights into institutionalizing school reform, but one of the most important findings is the importance of considering the broader institutional environment of school systems. (Contains 3 tables and 16 references.) (SLD)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 432 619

Institutional Constraints on Implementing School Reform: Lessons from Chicago

Gail L. Sunderman, Johns Hopkins University
Gloria Nardini, University of Illinois at Chicago

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Gail Sunderman

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

Prepared for presentation at the American Educational Research Association Annual Conference, Montreal, Canada, April 19-32, 1999. This research is sponsored in whole or in part by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI) of the U.S. Department of Education under Contract Number RJ96006301. The content does not necessarily reflect the views of OERI or the Department of Education, or does mention or visual representation of trade names or commercial products constitute endorsement by any branch of the U.S. Government. Merrill Chandler provided research assistance.

Please address correspondence to: Gail L. Sunderman, Center for Social Organization of Schools, Johns Hopkins University, 3003 N. Charles Street, Baltimore, MD 21218; (410) 516-8825; gsunderman@csos.jhu.edu.

TM030012

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Institutional Constraints on Implementing School Reform: Lessons from Chicago

Gail L. Sunderman & Gloria Nardini

To improve the schools, the Chicago Public School's administration is increasingly paying attention to accountability and academic achievement. With enhanced authority granted under provisions of the 1995 Chicago School Reform Amendatory Act (see Wong, Dreeben, Lynn, & Sunderman, 1997), the board has focused on the lowest performing schools within the system and placed a number of these schools on remediation, probation, and/or reconstitution.[1] The board's intervention strategy pairs these schools with mandatory and independent "external partners" who provide them with technical assistance and educational support services. The object, of course, is to raise both reading and math scores and help the schools move "off" probation.

This reliance on "external partners" to provide educational services, training, and staff development represents a shift from the traditional arrangement where specialists from the central office provided services. In a climate of bureaucratic downsizing, this strategy may be necessary to replace services once performed by central office staff. Nonetheless, there are few empirical studies that examine a systemwide approach to using outside agencies to provide educational services to schools and professional development for teachers and principals. This research attempts to fill that gap by examining the role of external partners in school reform in Chicago.

---

[1] These terms refer to the different levels of classifying poorly performing schools. Schools are eligible for "remediation" if they are on the State's Early Academic Warning List, a classification based on the Illinois Goals Assessment Program (IGAP). Schools can be placed on "probation" when fewer than 15 percent of their students score above the national norms on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) for elementary schools or the Test of Academic Proficiency (TAP) for high schools. Schools are eligible for "reconstitution" if they do not improve after one year on probation. When a school is reconstituted, the central office appoints a principal and all staff must re-apply for their positions. These schools could be closed if they don't improve.

Researchers have noted that "the failure to institutionalize an innovation and build it into the normal structures and practices of the organization underlies the disappearance of many reforms" (Fullan and Miles, 1992, p. 748). Cognizant of this all too frequent failing, this study addresses the question of how the institutional arrangements that a school is embedded in facilitates or constrains working in the Chicago schools to implement school reform. Specifically, focusing on one component of the Chicago approach to school reform, this research evaluates the implementation of services provided by one external partner, the factors that facilitate or constrain the implementation of those services, and the intervention strategies that are most effective in promoting school change.

The paper is organized in five sections. The first section outlines the analytical perspective that guides this research. We argue that the complexity of the organizational structure of schools, as well as the actions of teachers themselves, create conditions that facilitate or constrain the implementation of reform programs developed and implemented by external partners. Unless the institutional structure of the system as a whole and teacher autonomy are figured into the design of the program, institutionalizing long-term change is unlikely. The second section presents a brief summary of school reform in Chicago under the 1995 Chicago School Reform Amendatory Act, including the political context of the current reform movement. It also describes the specific intervention program provided by one external partner that our research followed. The third section describes the research design and data collection strategies. In the fourth section, we present our findings. We conclude with a summary and comments on the

implications of this study for policymakers and administrators interested in improving urban schools.

Analytical Perspective

To understand the effects of external partners in schools attempting to change, we consider both the institutional complexity of schools as well as the nature of teaching. From an institutional perspective, the actions of various actors at each level of the school system create conditions that facilitate or constrain the process of school change. External partners working in schools are also subject to the consequences of the actions of various actors. We also take into consideration the nature of teaching, which is structured to give teachers a high degree of discretion in how they teach. These two factors—institutional structure and teacher autonomy—organize the conditions under which external partners work and influence what they can and can not do.

To speak of institutional complexity means, first, to view programs as subject to the constraints imposed by the institutional environment within which schools are situated—the institutional arrangements governing a school establish the (de facto) parameters within which teachers' work. This includes how schools are organized as well as how schools incorporate the rules and structures built into the wider environment (March and Olsen, 1989; Scott and Meyer, 1994; Crowson, Boyd, & Mawhinney, eds., 1996). Thus, for example, attending to the technical core of schooling, that is to instructional practices, may be insufficient to change teaching practice if the organizational structures that support or produce those practices are not considered and perhaps altered as well. Additionally, we consider how each level of the school system contributes to shaping the outcomes of schooling (Barr & Dreeben, 1983). This includes

how institutional arrangements give legitimacy and meaning to particular actions, as well as how institutional arrangements affect the structure and operation of schools. For example, a district office may establish a particular program of study, mandate the implementation of standards, or require particular competencies on standardized tests for promotion. These policies are likely to affect how schools develop their curriculum and how teachers approach instruction.

Elmore (1996) links these broader institutional structures to the "specific problem of incentives," which, he says, "reforms need to address in order to get at the problem of scale" (p. 15). The problem includes both the incentives that operate on individuals and the "individual's willingness to recognize and respond to these incentives as legitimate" (p. 15). If teachers are actually going to change how they teach, institutions must offer them reasons to do so. For example, Elmore suggests as "internal systems of rewards" (p. 19) salary increments linked to changes in practice, release time to work on standards or new curriculum units, among others. Elmore argues that schools have failed to effectively use their institutional incentives to improve teaching practice. This failure, however, Elmore sees as rooted in cultural norms about teaching: often times, schools fail to develop and implement broad-based changes because reform strategies rely on the "intrinsic motivation of individuals with particular values and competencies" (p. 16). Since the percentage of teachers who are intrinsically motivated to change their practice is roughly 25 percent of the total population, it is "highly unlikely" (p. 17) that the incentive structures of many reform strategies—even if they did exist in an institutionalized fashion—would alter the proportion of teachers willing to change. The failure of schools to use their institutional incentives to improve practice is rooted both in

the design of the institutions and in the widely accepted cultural norm that "successful teaching is an individual trait rather than a set of learned professional competencies acquired over the course of a career" (p. 16).

Second, the implementation of intervention programs is likely to be mediated by the actions of teachers themselves. Lipsky's (1980) notion of "street-level bureaucracy" accords to workers the ability to define their work because of their relatively high degree of discretion and autonomy from organizational authority. Unlike lower-level workers in most organizations, street-level bureaucrats exercise considerable discretion in determining the nature, amount, and quality of services provided by their agencies. Their position within the organization means they are relatively free from supervision by superiors, and at the same time, demands that they make decisions and judgments about client service. In effect, their decisions and actions make agency policy.

Moreover, the conditions under which teachers work means they must make decisions regarding the distribution of services. Typically, teachers have fewer resources than are really necessary to do their job adequately. They may have insufficient time to do the required work given the number of students they have; organizational factors, such as an emphasis on paperwork or inadequate support services, may affect how teachers spend their time. Not infrequently, goal ambiguity or a lack of consensus on the best techniques or approaches to the job makes performance difficult. Conflict can also arise from the position of workers within the organization—teachers as workers have different job priorities than school administrators, which may put them in conflict with the policy objectives of the school system. Teachers attend to the particular concerns of their students while the school as an organization promotes systemwide goals (see also

Bidwell, 1965 and Lortie, 1975). Compliance is mediated by the extent to which workers consider managers' orders legitimate.

Chicago Public Schools and the 1995 School Reform Law

In 1995, the state legislature passed the Chicago School Reform Amendatory Act which redesigned how the district was governed.[2] Provisions of this law expanded the financial authorities of the board and strengthened and centralized the administration by linking the CPS administration to the school board and to the mayor (Wong, et al., 1997). The 1995 law also incorporated a focus on accountability and academic achievement that enhanced the powers of the CEO to identify poorly performing schools and place these schools on remediation, probation, or reconstitution. This meant that district policy focused on the lowest performing schools within the system. In January, 1996, the district placed 21 schools on remediation. By the 1997-98 school year, 109 schools out of 557 were on probation for poor academic performance. Another eight schools were recommended for reconstitution in June 1997.[3]

The guidelines for probation and reconstitution focus primarily on test scores. Schools are placed on probation if fewer than 15 percent of students score at or above the national norms in reading on the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills (ITBS) for elementary schools or the Test of Academic Proficiency (TAP) for high schools. To be removed from probation, 20 percent or more of a school's students must score at or above national norms in reading for one year or 15 percent for two consecutive years. According to the Illinois School Code, schools on probation for a year can be reconstituted if they "fail to make adequate progress in correcting deficiencies" (Section 5/34-8.3). When a school is

[2] Illinois State Assembly, *Chicago School Reform Amendatory Act*, Pub. L. No. 89-0015 (1995).

reconstituted, the central office assigns the principal and the entire staff must reapply for their positions. The Office of Accountability, who prepares a "School Report" outlining the strengths and weaknesses of each school and recommendations for improvement, makes these determinations. Schools are required to develop a Corrective Action Plan that details a plan of action in six areas: instructional program, professional development, school climate, parent/community partnership, school leadership, and school management. To "support" schools, the Office of Accountability adopted three resources. One is the School Operations Manager, the second is the Probation Manager, and the third is the external partner. The School Operations Manager assists the principal with the school's fiscal operations and the Probation Manager oversees the school improvement process. External partners are chosen by the principal and contracted to provide educational services to assist schools to improve.

This focus on probation and reconstitution is in response to a political climate in which the credibility of large urban districts has increasingly come under scrutiny. With the passage of the 1995 school reform law, the state legislature linked educational and financial performance to funding increases, thus creating an unprecedented focus on school improvement and accountability. In its stead, the Chicago district has defined school improvement and accountability almost exclusively in terms of standardized achievement test scores. In addition, the Chicago district created the Office of Accountability, who adopted the external partner as part of its intervention strategy. This use of external partners rather than central office staff to provide professional development services to the schools reflects a business approach that considers the private sector to be more adept than the public one.

---

[3] Six high schools and one elementary school were actually reconstituted.

Intervention Program of the External Partner: LEARN, the external partner this research followed, was one of twenty agencies, universities, or individuals that received a contract from the Chicago Public Schools to provide educational services to elementary and high schools placed on probation or constituted.[4] In response to a Request for Proposals (RFP) issued by the Office of Accountability, the Board of Trustees awarded the initial contract to LEARN in December 1995. LEARN was then placed on a list that schools used to select their external partner and it began work with four elementary schools at the beginning of the 1996-97 school year. By January 1998, ten elementary and four high schools had chosen LEARN. The Office of Accountability pays the costs of the external partnership during the first year while the cost for the second year is split evenly between the schools and the Office of Accountability. The third year is paid entirely by the schools. Schools use their discretionary funds, including state Chapter 1 and federal Title I schoolwide money, to cover the costs.

A primary goal of LEARN's intervention program was to improve teachers' instructional practices. They did this through the introduction of the Strategic Teaching and Reading Project (STRP), a program developed by LEARN as "an instructional improvement and professional development project" intended to improve student reading comprehension.[5] STRP is based on a definition of reading as a process of meaning building rather than as an application of a set of skills. Five comprehension strategies are taught to teachers to be used by students on a variety of cross-curricular reading materials. At the core of these strategies is the concept of metacognition, or thinking

[4] The acronym for the external partner, as well as all school names, names of principals, teachers, coaches, team leaders, etc., is a pseudonym.

about thinking. The other four strategies—prior knowledge, inferencing, word meaning, and text structure—fall under the umbrella of metacognition.

Other goals of the LEARN program included providing leadership development and support to principals, improving the school culture and climate, and increasing parent and community involvement in the schools. These four goals were tailored to meet the specification of the RFP. A fifth goal, providing assistance in technology, was added during the 1997-98 school year. Intervention strategies included whole-group professional development workshops and in-services and coaching with individual teachers.[6] In addition, schools were introduced to two whole school design models--Success for All (SFA) and the Talent Development High School—as well as to the *Everyday Mathematics* curriculum, and they were encouraged to adopt them.[7] A team leader was assigned to each school to coordinate the implementation of services, facilitate planning between the school and LEARN, and work with the school's leadership team. Coaches were hired as consultants based on their expertise in reading, math, and science. They worked individually with teachers to observe teaching practice, offer feedback, and

---

[5] From LEARN Web Site. STRP has its roots in a three-year staff development project (1987-1990) known as the "Rural Schools Reading Project," developed in partnership with the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, the Wisconsin Educational Communication Board, and 17 rural Wisconsin schools.

[6] The workshops included, for example, presentations on STRP, test-taking skills, and classroom management. Two workshops were provided on grant writing to assist schools applying for state and federal technology grants. During the summers of 1996 and 1997, LEARN held a five-day workshop for the school leadership team (i.e., principals, lead teachers, instructional coordinators, and/or department chairs) from probation schools. The 1996 session introduced participants to a variety of instructional programs, including Success for All and STRP, and the Everyday Math curriculum. The 1997 summer session emphasized leadership development and brought in a number of noted speakers from around the country. In May 1998, LEARN hosted noted educator Dr. Lorraine Monroe whose all-day workshop on leadership and school change was attended by principals and leadership teams.

[7] Success for All is a structured and intensive early intervention program designed to improve reading skills of at-risk students. The Talent Development High School is a comprehensive package of school changes for at risk high school students. Researchers at Johns Hopkins University developed both. *Everyday Mathematics* is an elementary school mathematics curriculum developed by the University of Chicago School Mathematics Project.

model instructional strategies. In 1998 additional consultants were added to help the schools meet the district requirement to provide character education.

Research Design and Data Collection

To examine the implementation of services provided by one external partner, LEARN, several strategies were used. The external partner provided one source of data. We conducted semi-structured interviews with members of the intervention team between May 1997 and May 1998. This included interviews with the program director and program developers, six interviews with three of the four team leaders, and twelve interviews with seven of the nine intervention specialists (coaches) working in the schools we visited. We attended one LEARN team leaders' planning meeting, observed two workshops delivered at LEARN's office, and four staff development workshops at the school site. Documentary and background materials were collected that included LEARN's service contract, school progress reports, interim status reports, and coaches' and team leaders' activity logs.

At the school level, case studies of Connelley and Alexander, two K-8 elementary schools, and Moritz and Pauley, two high schools, were developed. Schools were selected in collaboration with the program director at LEARN. Connelley and Alexander were similar in terms of demographic characteristics and the length of time they worked with LEARN. The two high schools were selected because they both started working with LEARN at about the same time and had similar student populations. Data collection and school visits took place between September 1997 and May 1998. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with principals, teachers, and other school personnel and classroom observations were made. We conducted 14 interviews with teachers, made 18

classroom observations, and interviewed the principal and SFA coordinator at Alexander. The classroom observations were in reading and math classes. Five teachers and four school administrators were interviewed at Connelley. At Moritz, we interviewed nine teachers, the principal, vice principal, probation manager, and the regional representative. We made eight classroom observations and attended two full day school meetings, two probation meetings, and two staff development workshops presented by LEARN. At Pauley, we interviewed six teachers, the principal, assistant principal, probation manager, and testing coordinator, and made 15 classroom observations. In addition, the observers kept field notes of visits to all of the schools. Finally, school report cards, Probation Corrective Action Plans, the Office of Accountability School Report, school improvement plans, and probation team minutes were examined for each of the four schools.

We developed protocols that guided our interviews and classroom observations. The interviews with the project director and other program developers informed us about the design and goals of the intervention program and kept us up to date on changes made in the program over time. The interviews with team leaders and coaches focused on their roles and responsibilities, the services they provided in the schools, strategies they used in working with teachers, and how they defined the problems of the school. We also paid attention to the relationship between the coaches and LEARN staff. The school level interviews and classroom observations were designed to determine how well the school implemented the intervention and how well teachers incorporated the strategies into their teaching practice. For example, we looked for evidence of whether or not teachers were using the suggested strategies in the classroom. Classroom teachers were interviewed

about the LEARN program, followed by observations in their classrooms. Coaches were also observed in the classroom as they worked with teachers. In some cases, classroom teachers were observed with the coach present, allowing the coach to point out what they had worked on with that teacher. During the site visits, particular attention was paid to the relationship between the school and the central office and the consequences of the probationary status for the school.

Connelley and Alexander, the elementary schools, were two of the first schools to choose LEARN as their external partner. Connelley was placed on probation in June 1996. Alexander was placed first on remediation in January 1996, and then on probation in June 1997.[8] Services began during the fall 1996 semester at both schools.[9] Both schools are located in a low-income neighborhood dominated by a high-rise public housing development (see table 1 for a description of socio-demographic characteristics).

Table 1: Socio-economic characteristics, Connelley and Alexander Elementary Schools, Chicago Public Schools, 1994-1996.

	Connelley			Alexander		
	1994	***1995***	***1996***	***1994***	***1995***	***1996***
Enrollment	827	732	736	673	630	568
% Black	100	100	100	100	100	100
% Low Income	89.4	83.9	92.7	92.9	96.5	94.0
% Daily Attendance	83.3	85.3	86.0	89.4	91.1	91.9
% Mobility	34.2	41.7	36.4	25.2	28.5	21.1
% Truant	4.7	2.7	5.6	12.6	3.0	5.7

Source: Chicago Public Schools, Office of Accountability, Department of Research, Assessment, & Quality Reviews, *School Information Database*, http://acct.multi1.cps.k-12.us/

[8] To be removed from remediation, schools had to have 20 percent or more of their students scoring at or above the national norms on the ITBS for elementary schools or the TAP for high schools and be removed from the state's watch list. Alexander was moved from remediation to probation because their test scores did not show sufficient improvement (see table 2).

[9] LEARN provided a "Summer Institute" on leadership in July 15-19, 1996 for staff from each school. School site services to Alexander began in October 1996 and to Connelley in November 1996.

Initially, LEARN provided very similar services to both schools. Principals were invited to attend a five-day "Summer Institute" held during the summer of 1996. Both schools were introduced to the *Everyday Mathematics* curriculum, STRP, and a team from each school went to Baltimore to observe the Success for All (SFA) program. A team leader and two or three coaches were assigned to both schools. Alexander adopted both the SFA program and the *Everyday Mathematics* curriculum, and both schools received training in STRP. The two schools differ, however, in outcomes. Alexander was quite satisfied with LEARN services and considered LEARN "an integral part of the school."[10] The principal credited them with providing leadership support and validating many of his ideas. The principal at Connelley, on the other hand, referred to LEARN's recommendations as "generic ideas" that didn't have anything to do with the ongoing, specific problems of the school. The two schools also differed on test scores (see table 2). Connelley was able to increase their scores enough in two years to move off probation, while Alexander did not.[11]

Table 2: Percentage of students scoring at or above national norms, Iowa Tests of Basic Skills (ITBS) Reading Comprehension and Math, Connelley, Alexander, and district average, Chicago Public Schools, 1990-1998

	Subject	*1990*	*1991*	*1992*	*1993*	*1994*	*1995*	*1996*	*1997*	*1998*
Connelley	Reading	9.2	8.2	5.6	7.0	6.3	6.0	7.6	14.9	23.1
	Math	13.9	14.2	12.9	11.9	7.3	14.7	12.0	24.0	26.0
Alexander	Reading	15.5	10.0	9.3	10.0	8.0	6.7	13.8	13.1	16.1
	Math	19.7	15.3	15.4	15.3	11.0	12.0	14.4	16.0	20.8
District Average	Reading	23.5	21.8	22.4	26.8	26.5	26.5	29.1	30.3	34.7
	Math	27.1	26.6	26.3	30.1	28.0	29.8	31.0	35.9	39.6

Source: Chicago Public Schools, Office of Accountability, Department of Research, Assessment, & Quality Reviews, *School Information Database*, http://acct.multi1.cps.k-12.us/

[10] Principal interview, 10-7-97.
[11] Connelley was removed from probation in June 1998.

The two high schools in the study, Jacob Moritz and Wharton Pauley, began working with LEARN in 1997. Moritz, placed on probation at the end of the 1995-96 school year, was the first high school to award LEARN a contract in January 1997. Pauley was also placed on probation in 1996; it was reconstituted with a new principal and new staff effective July 1, 1997.[12] Pauley contracted with LEARN in October 1997. Both of these schools are almost 100% African-American and are in low-income neighborhoods. Pauley, proud of its historic role as the first (and, at one time, the only) high school for African-Americans, is located in an area that is beginning to "gentrify." (See table 3 for a description of socio-demographic characteristics.)

Table 3: Socio-economic characteristics, Moritz and Pauley High Schools, Chicago Public Schools, 1994-1996.

	Moritz			Pauley		
	1994	*1995*	*1996*	*1994*	*1995*	*1996*
Enrollment	1910	1766	1601	1249	1409	1185
% Black	100	100	100	99.9	99.9	100
% Low Income	82.9	86.9	84.1	78.5	75.1	86.8
% Daily attendance	74.2	72.7	73.2	61.7	63	65
% Mobility	40.5	46.2	37.3	45.9	60.2	57
% Truant	17.5	21.7	24.4	42.1	24.4	9.7
% Graduation	36.1	50.5	57.9	41.7	44.6	45.7

Source: Chicago Public Schools, Office of Accountability, Department of Research, Assessment, & Quality Reviews, *School Information Database*, http://acct.multi1.cps.k-12.us/

LEARN's services to both schools initially centered on STRP workshops. In addition, a number of other workshops were offered that included the Theory of Constraints, test-taking skills, using graphic organizers, and gathering and using school data for school improvement. Each school had an STRP team leader and a math-science team leader that worked with the school leadership team. In both cases, two or

[12] When a school is reconstituted, the central office assigns the principal. All staff must reapply for their

three coaches were assigned to the schools one or more days a week. They observed teachers, worked with them individually or in small groups, "modeled" lessons, and served in other, practical ways.[13]

The reactions of the two principals to LEARN's services have been diametrically opposed. Moritz's Dennis Pound was pleased with his collaboration with LEARN, attributing many of his new educational understandings to them. The STRP coordinator said of his presence at a workshop, "I was just so pleased how he captured what had gone on. He said to me later, 'See my list. I got all that from LEARN. I want my people to know and to understand that I know and buy into it.'"[14] On the other hand, Betty Loren of Pauley had a very different view of the partnership. "I didn't get any of it! I don't want didactic lecturing," she announced vehemently when asked about what services LEARN had provided. "The piece that troubled me the most was the lack of planning," she said. "I feel betrayed. My teachers feel betrayed."[15] Nonetheless, students in both schools continued to perform below the district average on the TAP (see table 4). Neither school moved off probation by the end of the 1997-98 school year.[16]

---

jobs. At Pauley, 26% percent of the teachers and 3 of the 5 administrators were new at the beginning of the 1997-98 school year.

[13] For example, STRP coach Lana Keeler at Moritz helped put together and distribute hand-outs on teaching strategies for English teachers. Also at Moritz, Ernest Prince (assigned by LEARN as a coach in "Character Education," a district-mandated area) helped to judge projects for the Science Fair. At Pauley, STRP coach Linda Henderson met with the English Department on Saturday mornings to help write curriculum.

[14] Principal interview, 10-1-97.

[15] Principal interview, 5-21-98.

[16] Of the seven high schools reconstituted in 1997, none were removed from probationary status.

Fragmentation of authority and lack of role definition: The institutional literature suggests ways in which the broader institutional environment (institutional structure) influences the behavior of both schools and the external partner. It predicts that programs evolve in response to pressures from the immediate institutional environment. Here, "institutional environment" refers to the organization and operation of the district, of the schools themselves, and of the external partner. In this case, the rules, expectations, and norms governing the role of the external partner emanated from all three, creating constraints that necessitated adaptation on the part of LEARN.

In the initial phase of probation, the district created only a few guidelines and virtually no accountability mechanisms, thus loosely defining the role of the external partner. The request for proposals specified five broad goals a program should address,[17] while acceptance of a proposal was based on one purpose, "to increase student achievement."[18] From the district's perspective, this strategy prevented them from mandating any one particular approach to school improvement. Theoretically, schools could choose the approach best suited to their particular needs. From the external partner's perspective, these broad categories gave them flexibility in writing and marketing their proposal to the schools. In general, this strategy of loosely defining roles seemed to take into account the importance of choice in implementing an instructional program designed for a particular school.

---

[17] These include (1) increase student achievement, especially in reading and math on standardized tests; (2) improve school leadership, including school organization and fiscal management; (3) establish a student-centered learning climate; (4) provide effective professional development activities; and (5) promote parent community partnerships. Chicago Public Schools, Office of Accountability Intervention Department. *Proposal Request.* Issued 1995.

[18] Chicago Public Schools, Office of Accountability, Department of School Intervention memo, *Suggestions for Evaluation of External Partners' School-Based Program,* no date.

Despite this flexibility, once in the school, LEARN's authority over the instructional program was constrained by competition from other administrative actors. As part of its reform, the district introduced a number of new actors into the school, some who had authority over the instructional program. These actors included the probation manager and representatives from the regional office and the Office of Accountability. In one school, for example, the probation manager actively pursued his own vision of reform, one that differed substantially from that of LEARN. Requirements imposed on the principal as a condition of probation also created competing sources of ideas on instructional improvement. In addition to working with LEARN, the principal was required to attend "principal meetings" once a month in the central office where suggestions were made on improving the instructional program. The Office of Accountability also required monthly probation meetings in which the region was represented and expected to play a significant role in helping the school off probation.

By the second year of the program, the board introduced a number of new regulations governing external partnerships. While program adjustments are a common feature in the implementation of new programs (Peterson, Rabe, & Wong, 1986), they can also create conditions that contribute to fragmentation in the delivery of services. Sometimes LEARN modified its program to accommodate these new policies. For example, they added coaches to meet the district requirement of teaching "character education" or added workshops on test taking to accommodate district testing priorities. At other times, the new rules disrupted the delivery of services. For example, in December 1997, the board required a letter of understanding signed by the school before approving the contract. This change delayed the start-up of services to Pauley High

School until January 1998. Classroom observations did not begin until February 1998 after LEARN had hired additional consultants to work in the school. By this time, the instructional emphasis at Pauley had shifted as teachers began to focus on the upcoming standardized testing.

Notwithstanding the broad guidelines, both the district and the schools held expectations about the role of the external partner that were often quite high. For example, one elementary school chose LEARN after working with another external partner for a year. The principal believed the school had made significant progress that "didn't show up on the test scores." Optimistically, she considered LEARN as "the last little piece of the puzzle we need to put us over the edge."[19] In other instances as well, LEARN was expected to "hit the field running," with an immediate game plan and strategy for implementation. One of the predictable consequences of these expectations was the inability of LEARN to thoroughly assess the needs of the school or to engage in long term planning. One team leader said:

> But the other thing that prevents us from long term planning is that, remember, we are providing a service that's for sale to the schools. So we enter into a contract with them to provide work and it would be very hard to sell the idea that we're going to do a year of planning. . . So, we operate on two levels at the same time. We try to meet these immediate needs, you know, "just enough, just in time." We're responding very quickly to an immediate concern and we try to do some long-term planning.[20]

In some ways the above-mentioned fragmentation made LEARN's role easier to delineate. That is, short-term discrete problems could be dealt with by short-term discrete solutions that gave LEARN credibility. For example, LEARN provided workshops on how to apply for technology grants that helped schools write proposals and meet application deadlines. They also responded with test taking workshops as they

---

[19] Principal interview, 3-24-98.

began to understand the centrality of higher scores on standardized tests to the district's definition of school improvement. Nonetheless, the need to provide a service precluded adequate assessment of each school and resulted in an over reliance on workshops prepared for large groups of people.

LEARN's organizational expectations also played a role in fragmentation. LEARN is a non-profit agency supported primarily through contracts and grants from the federal government. Nonetheless, they are subject to pressures to bring in additional resources, and responded by actively recruiting additional schools. They began with four elementary schools in September 1996, added two elementary and one high school in January 1997, one elementary and two high schools in July 1997, and four elementary schools in January 1998. To accommodate this rapid growth, LEARN increasingly relied on workshops and in-services, thus accommodating large numbers with a minimal staff. Theoretically, workshops were to be followed by individual coaching of teachers, but coaches were unable to provide the level or intensity of service most teachers needed. The structure of the coaching model also did not include sufficient time for teachers to practice the new techniques.

Divisions over basic questions about professional goals, educational priorities, and educational processes: The value of the workshops, particularly leadership workshops, is that they bring external knowledge and ways of doing things to principals and teachers. They legitimize ideas about teaching and leadership that school personnel otherwise may be reluctant to try. They also link teachers and principals to other professionals within the system as well as to a professional community beyond the school and district. Nonetheless, how well teachers and principals incorporate the new ideas is

---

[20] Team leader interview, 3-30-98.

closely related to how well these ideas address the goals and priorities of a particular school, in other words, to how well the specific institutional environment of each school is accommodated by the external partner. In those cases where there was a match between the program LEARN introduced and the goals and priorities of the school, the collaboration was much more successful.

This was the case with Pound at Moritz High School. A naturally charismatic leader with years of coaching experience, Pound was new to the job of principal. "We both kind of hit the school at the same time," he says of LEARN. It turned out to be a good fit in several ways. First, according to Randall Smith, his probation manager,[21] Pound, a former coach, "particularly understands the idea of teams." This team approach to leadership has allowed him to mesh with the motivational style fostered by LEARN. Says Pound about the beginning of the year, "We had LEARN do an in-service for our teachers. This is where the team leader kind of did his thing . . . gave examples of how teachers should really love students and care about where they come from and that kind of thing."[22] He credits LEARN with giving him the "focus" and "confidence" to "stand in front of the faculty and let them know what we were really trying to do."

Second, Pound "understands the need to grow himself," says Smith.[23] This also suits LEARN's emphasis on leadership development. For example, by taking him to Patterson High School in Baltimore, LEARN introduced Pound to the talent development model's motivational use of banners and posters. Crediting LEARN with helping him

---

[21] It is interesting to note that the Smith-Pound relationship was also a "fit," the former taking the role of mentor to the principal. What could have been an institutional constraint detrimental to the probationary process was, instead, an asset.
[22] Principal interview, 10-1-97.
[23] Probation manager interview, 4-30-98.

find the tools to foster a better environment, Moritz's halls are now festooned with such displays.

There was also close agreement between the educational objectives at Alexander and the type of services that LEARN recommended. Since many of the students at Alexander were academically unprepared to come to school, the school had targeted "readiness skills" as a primary goal. The principal was considering a number of reading programs to assist his school, including Success for All. In addition, the school was searching for a new math curriculum. After talking with a LEARN representative, the principal found "we were so much on the same page, I felt this must be the thing to do." LEARN provided additional information on the SFA program that "validated some of my thoughts and ideas."[24]

In other schools, the fit was less automatic. Fundamental differences between LEARN and Connelley about how to approach school improvement contributed to a highly contentious relationship. The staff considered the probationary status illegitimate because probation did not adequately take into consideration the effect of conditions external to the school. According to the principal, "They have just changed our status, our designation from the outside [i.e., placing the school on probation], but the conditions have been here all along."[25] These conditions the principal referred to include the high number of children from low-income, single parent families, with myriad academic deficiencies, and the high level of violence in the neighborhood.

LEARN, on the other hand, considered the problems to be related to the leadership from the principal and leadership team and to the poor quality of the teaching

[24] Principal interview, 10-7-98.
[25] Principal interview, 2-26-98.

staff.[26] According to LEARN, the principal seemed unwilling to make substantive changes that challenged the status quo. In addition, few teachers seemed willing to recognize or accept responsibility for the school's low performance, and many were indifferent or hostile to professional development opportunities.[27] The principal conceded that some teachers did not perform well, but he believed he was doing everything he could to help them improve. LEARN's recommendation to remove some of the poorly performing teachers lacked "judgment," he said, because "sometimes you have to hang on to an individual who is less productive in order to protect the people who are really producing for you."[28] In other words, union protections on seniority may cause the loss of a more valued but less experienced person when a more senior level person is fired. He disagreed with LEARN's suggestion to adopt Success for All, recognizing that his staff would not implement it. Relations were further strained when LEARN recommended the school for reconstitution at the end of the 1996-97 school year. Commenting on that experience, the principal recalled:

> The alderman called for my ouster, said the school was beyond help, and the only way to fix it was to throw everybody in the school out. . . .[LEARN] too, called for my ouster. And to get rid of the faculty, most of the faculty, and staff. But, you know, it's a known fact, when you're down, people stomp you. But I have been down many times before. I just keep right on working.[29]

Nonetheless, Connelley was able to avoid reconstitution because their test scores improved (see table 2).

By the second year of probation, Connelley and LEARN had reached an uneasy accommodation. LEARN services were curtailed to one STRP coach who went to the

---

[26] LEARN, Interim status report on technical assistance and professional development services provided under the Chicago Public Schools Office of Accountability intervention and support process. No date (probably spring 1997).
[27] Ibid.

school twice a week. The team leader maintained a less visible presence with the leadership and exerted even more limited influence on school decisions. Workshops and in-services were increasingly relied upon to fulfill the terms of the service agreement.

Reliance on individual (intrinsic) motivation rather than on institutional incentives: The problem of how to involve and motivate teachers to engage in new teaching practices remains. LEARN's approach was to start with workshops and then reinforce the content knowledge delivered in the workshops in two ways. First, coaches were employed to work with individual teachers. These coaches visited classrooms, observed teachers, provided feedback, and "modeled" teaching strategies. Second, through a "trainer-of-trainers" model, selected teachers already trained in STRP practices gave workshops to their colleagues, who were then to follow suit in their own classrooms. Crucial to institutionalizing school change, however, is linking these strategies to incentive structures that reward teachers for using them (Elmore, 1996). For the most part, LEARN relied on the motivation, intrinsic understanding, and skills of individual teachers to integrate new information into their teaching. Indeed, the leadership team at Connelley, realizing that many teachers were not implementing STRP strategies despite the need for improved instructional practices, commented, "LEARN said, 'We've done it. Now it's up to the teachers to use it.'"[30] When institutional structures were used, it resulted from the initiative of individual coaches or from the school itself.

This reliance on the intrinsic motivation of the teachers is exemplified by the strategies available to the coaches. Frequently, modeling seemed to be the primary

---

[28] Principal interview, 2-26-98.
[29] Ibid.

strategy used by coaches. For example, a math coach working with a particularly difficult teacher commented, "Hopefully, the brisk pace at which I taught the lesson, involved many students actively, gave consistent verbal praise for appropriate choices, and set my behavior expectations immediately was a good example for Ms. Peters."[31] In other instances the reliance on individual teacher motivation resulted from the infrequency of the coaches' visits. Math coaches typically worked with a teacher once every two weeks; there was only one STRP coach at Connelley; and many of the high school coaches had no regularly scheduled time with teachers. In fact, some high school teachers seemed unaware of LEARN presence at all, much to the chagrin of the Pauley probation manager. He commented, "The [LEARN] approach to me leaves something to be desired. I just feel that you've got to get it and see and spend some time in there and be able to check with people on a regular basis, not periodically."[32]

A few coaches relied less on modeling as a strategy to secure teacher buy-in and more upon their understanding of the mindset and methodology of the classroom teacher. In fact, they spent time as silent observers before launching into action. One coach, regarded by LEARN as "setting the standard for all coaches," said, "How can I tell them what to do when I don't know what and how they're doing it?"[33] One team leader remarked, "Coaches must not only be grounded in content area theory, they must be adept at facilitating adult learning, and they must be comfortable adapting materials to meet the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse students and staff."[34] These comments bespeak an understanding of "incentive structures" as empowering teachers to

---

[30] Leadership team interview, 2-26-98.
[31] Monthly progress report, February 1998.
[32] Probation manager interview, 5-1-98.
[33] Coach interview, 3-17-98.

take control of the classroom in ways that will make their jobs more successful and, thus, more pleasant. The reward of integrating the new information becomes the changed classroom atmosphere.

Interestingly, at Pauley the principal and the leadership team recognized the importance of using institutional incentives to motivate and reinforce the work of the external partner. For example, Pauley requires teachers to have 15 hours of professional development a year. When LEARN workshops could be counted as part of this, staff interest in them increased. The principal also requested assistance from LEARN to develop a school-wide technology plan because "I didn't want half my staff to feel left out."[35] The LEARN workshops were primarily attended by the core curricular teachers, and the principal saw the development of a plan to integrate technology into the classroom as a way to bring in all of the staff.

Mediation by the action of teachers themselves: Lipsky's model of the street-level bureaucrat suggests that the implementation of an intervention program is likely to be mediated by the actions of teachers themselves. This often times results in practices that are different from those intended by the external partner. It is important to note, however, that teachers' actions are a response to the constraints operating on them. Indeed, understanding that teachers' responses are related to how their work is structured helps to account for their lack of responsiveness to reform activities or their failure to adopt new practices. Lipsky's model predicts that when teachers are confronted with conflicting or ambiguous goals, thus creating uncertainty about what they are to do, they respond by organizing their work in ways that reduce this uncertainty and derive a

---

[34] Team leader interview, 6-1-98.
[35] Principal interview, 5-21-98.

solution. In this case, we identified a conflict between the district goal of increasing student achievement as measured by standardized achievement tests and LEARN's emphasis on improving the curriculum and teachers' instructional practices. To reconcile these conflicting objectives, teachers adopted a number of coping strategies that either restricted the implementation of the LEARN suggested strategies or personalized its goals.

To accommodate the district objective, teachers were required to have students take practice tests and do other test taking activities. Frequently, the school administration, under similar pressure from the district office, reinforced test preparation, even when it conflicted with other goals. For example, one coach said she "spent a lot of time trying to balance the *Everyday Math* [sic] against principal pressure to use other math activities and programs to prepare for the test."[36] On the other hand, LEARN introduced programs, curriculums, and strategies that required substantial changes in teachers' instructional practice. While these programs and strategies should help students improve test scores, this was not always apparent to teachers. For example, many of the teachers were unconvinced that the *Everyday Mathematics* curriculum would adequately prepare their students for the IGAP or the ITBS. Consequently, they used the curriculum selectively, if at all, choosing those elements they believed reinforced what would be on the test. The coach was unable to convince them of the applicability of the curriculum to the demands of the standardized tests: "Even though I showed them how the program met the testing needs, they did not believe it."[37]

[36] Coach interview, 9-16-97.
[37] Ibid.

Teachers also personalized their lessons as a way to maintain some discretion over their instructional practices. For example, in April 1997, a math coach observed a teacher introduce two very different concepts in the same lesson while *Everyday Mathematics* suggests presenting only one important concept per lesson. Moreover, the teacher did not use math manipulatives or model the lesson as the *Everyday Mathematics* curriculum would have it. In her own way she adapted the lesson to meet what she thought students needed to know. One 4th grade teacher, commenting on the SFA program, said: "Success for All has a lot of great qualities, but for certain grade levels, I think certain things need to be altered."[38] Because this teacher believed that SFA required too much repetition, she compressed some of the SFA activities into one lesson. Even the assistant principal recognized that "the difficulty we're finding is getting people to put aside their instructional preferences and use the new programs which have been shown to be effective elsewhere."[39]

Teachers also encountered conflicting goals arising from the introduction of a number of instructional interventions. Alexander had three programs focusing on instructional strategies: SFA, STRP, and a district-required critical thinking program. In addition to STRP, high school teachers were implementing Writing Across the Curriculum, a schoolwide strategy designed to improve writing and help students prepare for the writing section on the IGAP. In one high school, teachers were required to attend workshops on teaching strategies in addition to those on STRP. In these instances, teachers had to make decisions about how to integrate the various programs and strategies into their teaching practice. Commenting on the introduction of STRP to new

[38] Teacher interview, 12-9-97.
[39] Assistant principal interview, 10-17-97.

teachers at Pauley, a reading resource teacher said: " . . . if you just come out of college, you've just got an enormous amount of information, and then here for LEARN to come and say here are some other things, how do you separate or know which road to take? This was a dilemma for many of the young teachers."[40]

This same analysis can be extended to the external partner. Team leaders and coaches work under conditions very similar to those of teachers—they have high degrees of discretion and work under conditions where objectives can be ambiguous and the time needed to do the job limited. In this case, rapid expansion led to too many schools and too few personnel to do the job. To cope with these constraints—limited time and an expanding client load—LEARN approached schools with routines and workshops that made their job more manageable.

Because many tend to be former Chicago Public School teachers, coaches and team leaders have an insider's knowledge of the problems of the schools. This is a definite strength in their establishing camaraderie with the teachers but it also means that they frequently use this knowledge to diagnose the problems facing the schools. While this may seem to expedite their work—they can come in with workshops and other approaches already developed—in the long run, it may preclude understanding the particular context of each school. For example, while the students in both Connelley and Alexander are very likely to be similar in their level of readiness for school since they come from essentially the same neighborhood, the context of the two schools was very different. Most importantly, they defined their problems very differently. Connelley identified the problem as the students themselves, whereas Alexander identified the problem as students' readiness skills. The challenge for LEARN lay in helping

[40] Teacher interview, 5-21-98.

Connelley to redefine the problem, whereas at Alexander it lay in helping select a program that addressed readiness skills.

Conclusions and Implications

What does this example of one external partner working in the Chicago Public Schools tell us about the possibilities of institutionalizing school reform? To institutionalize school change, programs need to pay attention to how institutional structure and teacher autonomy either facilitate or constrain their efforts. Indeed, when the institutional constraints operating on teachers were considered or individual consultants took advantage of existing structures to work with teachers, teachers were more likely to adopt new practices. Also, when the goals and priorities of the external partner matched those of the school, change was more likely. Nonetheless, such "fits" were chance occurrences, not strategies intentionally incorporated into the design of the intervention program. This is not surprising since many of the service providers are former teachers or principals and their expertise lies in curriculum and instruction. This view of schools privileges their concerns.

On the other hand, an external partner cannot ignore the broader institutional environment of school systems. Each level of the school system has its own priorities, and actors at each level make decisions which may or may not facilitate the work of an external partner. For example, the district decision to support probationary schools with additional personnel was important in maintaining the credibility of the district policy. It demonstrated that district administrators were not just being punitive by placing schools on probation, but were if fact providing additional resources to help schools improve.

Nonetheless, it resulted in additional actors with authority over the instructional program and created competition between LEARN, the principal, and the new actors.

In addition, in many instances the external partner did not take advantage of the institutional arrangements that could be used to leverage change. Instead, they depended on their influence with the principal or upon their persuasive abilities to effect teacher "buy-in." Indeed, LEARN put a great deal of effort into "selling" its services to the principal and the staff, relying both upon motivational presentations and upon their ability to identify with and have school employees identify with them. Moreover, LEARN's authority, which depends on research and expertise, pales beside the constraints that govern the everyday life of teachers and schools.

To respond to these broader institutional constraints, our research found that staff development programs delivered by one external partner changed over time to more closely approximate traditional models of professional development. The external partner adopted a model of professional development where they provided the expertise and schools were expected to implement, on their own, what was presented. While we examined just one external partner, we believe these findings would extend to other services providers working in the Chicago Public Schools (see for example, Wong and Anagnostopoulos 1998).

Implementing whole school reform programs, now receiving additional attention because of the recent passage of the Comprehensive School Reform Provisions enacted in the FY1998 Labor-Health and Human Services-Education Appropriations Act (P.L. 105-78), is also likely to encounter similar challenges to the ones that we identified here. While these models may offer externally developed school restructuring programs, their

success too is dependent on the same factors that constrain external partners.[41] Indeed, the issue is not the design of the programs themselves, but the extent to which they incorporate strategies to address these broader issues. Since many of the challenges we identified fall outside the design of the programs themselves or issues of curriculum and instruction, attention needs to be devoted to how schooling is organized. Our findings suggest an important role for the central office in institutionalizing school change, since they establish the conditions for change through their control of the available resources and institutional arrangements.

[41] See, for example, Susan J. Bodilly, et. al. (1998). *Lessons from New American Schools' Scale-Up Phase: Prospects for Bringing Designs to Multiple Schools.* Santa Monica, CA: RAND.

References

Barr, Rebecca & Robert Dreeben (1983). *How schools work.* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Bidwell, Charles E. (1965). The school as a formal organization. In J.G. March (Ed.), *Handbook of organizations* (pp. 972-1018). Chicago: Rand McNally.

Bodilly, Susan J., et. al. (1998). *Lessons from New American Schools' scale-up phase: Prospects for bringing designs to multiple schools.* Santa Monica, CA.: RAND.

Crowson, Robert L., William Lowe Boyd, & Hanne B. Mawhinney, eds. (1996). *The politics of education and the new institutionalism: Reinventing the American school.* Washington, DC: The Falmer Press.

Elmore, Richard F. (1996). Getting to scale with good educational practice. *Harvard Educational Review,* 66 (1), 1-26.

Fullan, Michael G. & Matthew B. Miles (1992). Getting reform right: What works and what doesn't. *Phi Delta Kappan,* 73 (10), 745-752.

Graham, Patricia Albjerg (1993). What America has expected of its schools over the past century. *American Journal of Education* 101 (February), 83-99.

Illinois State Board of Education (1996). *The school code of Illinois.* Springfield, IL.: Author.

Lipsky, Michael (1980). *Street-level bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the individual in public services.* New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

Lortie, Dan (1975). *Schoolteacher: A sociological study.* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

March, James G. & Johan P. Olsen (1989). *Rediscovering institutions: The organizational basis of politics.* New York: The Free Press.

McDermott, Kathryn A. (1997). *Barriers to large-scale success of models for urban school reform.* Paper presented at the meeting of the American Political Science Association, Washington, DC.

Peterson, Paul E., Barry G. Rabe, & Kenneth K. Wong (1986). *When federalism works.* Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution.

Scott, W. Richard & John W. Meyer, eds. (1994). *Institutional environments and organizations.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Wong, Kenneth K., Robert Dreeben, Laurence E. Lynn, Jr. & Gail L. Sunderman (1997). *Integrated governance as a reform strategy in the Chicago Public Schools.* Chicago: Department of Education & Irving B. Harris Graduate School of Public Policy Studies, The University of Chicago.

Wong, Kenneth K. & Dorothea Anagnostopoulos (1998). Can integrated governance reconstruct teaching? Lessons learned from two low-performing Chicago high schools. *Educational Policy* 12, 31-47.